STEPPING INTO A MIRROR.
TEMPORARY VISITS TO THE FICTIONAL CITY OF VENICE

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About Venice, a limitless amount of texts has been written, but no matter how dismissive or praiseful these stories or essays are – every author agrees on one thing: you cannot remain there. The necessity of the temporality of every visit to Venice has anchored itself in everyday life, in both high brow and in tourist culture. Of course, every tourist destination is temporary – but in Venice, there is more at stake. An extended stay does not lead to boredom or bankruptcy: it leads to madness and death. One *cannot* stay; no tourist or artist will consider moving there; the city has no international scene; tourist facilities for longer stays are rare; in Venice, one has to get away in time.
Modern literature has played an important role in the construction of this myth. The aura of Venice is most famously established by *Death in Venice*, the novel written by Thomas Mann in 1911. Gustav von Aschenbach, an aging writer suffering from writer's block, goes on a short vacation (1). In a hotel at the Lido, Aschenbach becomes smitten with the boy Tadzio. Obsessed and lonely, he follows him everywhere. Rumours about a plague start rising and everyone leaves Venice as soon as possible. Aschenbach stays, he deceives himself by dyeing his hair, but a few hours later, he dies on the beach.
All the clichés concerning Venice are present. The secret of Aschenbach is the secret of the city: his love for Tadzio is unnatural and superficial; it offers no real perspective; it seeks youth were there is only decay and history. Every visitor should remain a visitor, and regard Venice as a warning: it is not possible to be so 'improbable' as this city. Floating on water, beautiful and special in every corner, romantic at every instant, made for the pleasure of the eye – and all this with only old reasons to be so, or with solipsistic and money hungry motives.
Hundreds of novels have been written that take place in Venice, and that depict the city as 'uninhabitable'. Before Mann there was *The Aspern Papers* (1888) by James, or *Little Dorrit* (1857) by Dickens. Contemporary with Mann, Proust wrote about the longing for Venice in his *Recherche*. Since then, Venice has acted as a setting for stories by such diverse writers as Du Maurier, Sollers, Hemingway, Hartley, Marai, Weyergans, Jong, Simenon, Sebald, McEwan and Ishiguro – and all of them have depicted characters that are attracted to Venice but that stay too long, with fatal or at least important consequences.

In literary studies some books have been devoted to either the attention one single writer has given to Venice (2) or to the textual mechanisms for depicting a city in general (3). One noteworthy study by the late Tony Tanner describes literary Venice-texts under the sign of 'desire', but ends up in an exalted and 'deleuzian' perspective. 'Desire is the force that engenders, maintains and extends the city of Venice,' writes Tanner, but, on the other hand he does realize that, 'Venice has a way of turning on her writerly admirers as no other city does.' (4) Other scholarly research has positioned the Venice literature inside of the genre of the 'gothic novel', paying attention to the macabre and the fantastic aspects of the city.
To escape this deadlock of generalizing or particular view, it is necessary to turn to the historiography. The most important feature of the history of Venice is that the city

and everything defining it has been *intentional*. Ever since the twelfth century (and the construction of the Arsenale as the infrastructure for the fleet of the independent Republic), this city seems to have been made by one mastermind. The myth of Venice is therefore a rare thing: it is constructed by the inhabitants of one single town, in order to combat the forces of nature at a central position; to fight or impress the opponents; to attract customers, artists, noblemen or *maecenae*; to establish an equilibrium between the world religions; and finally to remain a 'hotspot' in a world ruled by tourism. Venice is the navel of the world, wrote Ruskin in his *Stones of Venice* (5), and indeed this city has been exemplary in the way it has materialized every ideological battle or cultural circumvolution. It has absorbed everything that was important during the last 1000 years, and it has always known and made visible that it did so in a terrific way.
Historians have done thorough research on this subject. In the his aptly titled book *The Ceremonial City*, Iain Fenlon writes about Venice at the end of the 16th century – a decisive period for the Republic, after the Council of Trent, and after the decimation of the population by the Turks. Fenlon describes how the elite carefully adjusted the rhetoric of Venice so that it remained effective (6). On a sociological level, the book *Venice Triumphant* by Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan is of importance. She stresses the shared and material experience of the Venetian myth. Multiple instruments were used to produce unity and enhance the common dream of one community (7).
In his book *Venice and the Renaissance* architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri bridged this particular historical project with the way we deal with the city at this very moment. Since the fall of the Republic in 1797, it has become one of the many cities in the world – but at the same time, although there are no actual reasons for this otherness, Venice remains different and improbable. 'Venice:' writes Tafuri, 'she can be seen as the place in which antitheses have been removed, in which dialectics has no function, in which there is no contradiction between tradition and innovation.' (8) The end of dialectics is the end of progress and of reasoning: the history of Venice is a *given*, a set of theses without consequence, that are never contradicted or analyzed; Venice simply *remains*. Paradoxically, Tafuri argues, this status as the embodiment of 'dialectics at a standstill', turns Venice into a hypermodern city. Tafuri quotes Nietzsche: 'An image for the men of the future.' The difficulty of a teleological development is the characteristic of Venice, and it is the characteristic of modernity as well.

What I want to indicate, after this historiographical prologue, is that the project of modern literature has *recognized* Venice as its material double; every story that takes place in Venice shows literature stepping into a mirror. The characteristics of Venice that are at stake, and that have been constructed above, are the following. An affirmative and collective intentionality, whose reason for existence lies in the past, but whose results are still exquisitely visible; a presence that just *is*, that cannot be explained or justified (or only economically by tourism) or be used as a stepping stone in a next phase; a total beauty, shaped for the eye, as if it was a wonderful theme park – but it is not, as we are fully aware of the history and the 'reality' of it. Are these properties not the properties of literature? Presence but artificiality at the same time; historical and present time combined; an author that we can never know but to whom we owe everything; reality as an *effect* rather than as a given – and to summarize: reading as an activity that we can never justify, that is attractive but literally 'unbelievable', that confronts us with all aspects of human life, but that we need to abandon in time, in order to remain attached to human life itself. The reason why we

need to leave Venice is the reason why we need to stop reading a novel and start living again.

The novel in which this dilemma is firstly embodied, hasn't been mentioned yet. The story takes place during the last years of the Republic of Venice, at the end of the 18th century, and it establishes the role Venice will play in modern literature. It is called *Der Geisterseher* or *The Ghost-Seer* and it was written by Friedrich Schiller between 1796 and 1798, although it remained unfinished (9). A young prince lives modestly but temporarily in Venice with his companion Count O., the narrator. The prince is continuously confronted with supernatural and strange events. He can never explain what happens to him, although he feverishly tries. Especially the mythical role an Armenian man starts to play can never be understood. Right from the beginning, the prince realizes what is at stake: the temptations of ghosts and spirits, and the attraction of radical scepticism. No wonder then, when the Prince quotes Hamlet: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' The problematic of *Der Geisterseher* is embodied by the Armenian, an unknown man who keeps popping up and keeps doing unexplainable things. 'But who is he, then?' asks the prince. 'Where does he come from? What truth is there in the identity he gives himself?' At which the Sicilian, who has met the Armenian stranger before, replies: 'There is no truth in any of his appearances. There are few classes, characters and nations, whose mask he has not already worn. Who is he, you ask? Where does he come from? Where is he going? Nobody knows. Among us he is known only under the name of *The Unfathomable*.'
The 'unfathomable' – in German: 'des Unergründlichen'. That which has no ground, no foundation or depth. What is indeed a better description for Venice, a city built on water, than 'the unfathomable', 'das Unergründlichen', a fictional city because beyond its many appearances there is no possible truth – although it imperturbably acts as if the opposite is true? It is necessary to oppose this term, 'das Unergründlichen', to 'das Unheimliche', the 'un-home-ly', as coined by Freud. Venice has often been called 'unheimlich', and indeed it can appear to be 'unhomely', frightening, familiar and foreign at the same time – but only after a prolonged and mostly happy and luxurious stay. Rather than 'unheimlich', Venice is 'unergründlich': taking measure of it, testing it, visiting it, is indeed a case of finding no home – but one exceptional and wonderful adventure instead. The prince of Schiller has to leave, because he cannot fill his life with thoughts on the intricacies and the mysteries of Venice. Life – and thus: things that are not so important, difficult or historical, reclaim their rights. The unfinished story of Schiller ends with the death of a woman the prince has fallen in love with, and with his conversion to Catholicism. The adventurousness of Venice prompts three possible reactions: leaving, dying, or converting to a significant universe, and thus filling up the empty core of the city.

Since Schiller, literature has driven the representations of Venice to extremes. Even the critique on Venice as the capital of capitalism and tourism, has been treated and processed. One can think of the essay by Mary McCarthy, *Venice Observed* (1961), or of the novel *The comfort of strangers* (1981) by Ian McEwan. In this novel, an English couple is on holiday. One evening, they get lost amongst the canals of the city and are befriended by a stranger named Robert and his wife. In typical McEwan-fashion, the story becomes cruel: Robert has had a sadistic upbringing, and he has kept his wife as a prisoner for more than ten years. In the end, he kills Colin in front of Mary's eyes. Here, Venice has become a dystopic place, filled with too many

people, too hot or too rainy, with stale air and crumbling buildings. Again, the same characteristics are applicable to literature: reading McEwan is a peculiar pleasure, since the events narrated are as horrifying as the city in which they take place. The greater and truer pleasure – derived from Venice or from literature – comes from something else: being confronted with the auctorial construction of places and events, with a visible but unknowable history, and with a clear and coherent worldview – that is, however, too unfathomable to reveal its core.

Venice is, to conclude, one of the last places on earth that can combine the vastness and the casualness of the daily world, with the coherence, the history and the intentionality of art. We, modern people, can no longer accept that part of the real world behaves in ways that we have reserved for art and literature. That is why modern literature has both attacked and adored this small piece of 'artistic reality' or 'real art'. When literature has fictionalized Venice, it has at the same time preserved the status of its own mirror image in reality. Nothing and nobody can survive without knowing that it is possible to step, however shortly, in reality or in fiction, into a mirror.

(1) MANN, Thomas – *Death in Venice*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.
(2) For example COLLIER, Peter – *Proust and Venice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
(3) For example ROSS, Michael L. – *Storied cities: literary imaginings of Florence, Venice and Rome*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1994.
(4) TANNER, Tony – *Venice Desired*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp.2-5.
(5) RUSKIN, John – *Stones of Venice*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003, p.121.
(6) FENLON, Iain – *The Ceremonial City. History, Memory and Myth in Renaissance Venice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p.331.
(7) CROUZET-PAVAN, Elisabeth – *Venice Triumphant. The horizons of a myth*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp.271-272.
(8) TAFURI, Manfredo, *Venice and the Renaissance*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, pp.x-xi.
(9) SCHILLER, Friedrich von, *The Ghost-seer*. Hesperus Press, 2003.

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